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# Language education at the University of Aveiro before and after Bologna: Practices and discourses<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Higher education plays a fundamental role in the construction of a European citizenship that demands the development of plurilingual competences. Although the Bologna Process highlights that development (relating it to mobility, employability and lifelong learning), language education does not seem to be a priority in the agenda of higher education institutions (Tudor 2006). In the context of curricular restructuring required by the Bologna Process, this article presents a case study of the University of Aveiro (UA), Portugal, which set out to describe institutional practices and discourses concerning the use and function of languages in undergraduate and postgraduate education in two academic years (2002–2003 and 2007–2008, before and after the restructuring). In order to identify practices, we analysed the programmes of all language courses. This allowed us to identify the languages and language courses offered, as well as the degree programmes into which they are integrated. In order to access institutional discourses, we interviewed seven actors responsible for training and management at the UA (Rectors, Vice-Rectors, the Head of the Department of Languages and Cultures, The Erasmus Programme Coordinator, and the President of the Students' Union). The results show that the Bologna Process has had a limiting effect on language education: fewer language courses are offered and fewer degree programmes include them. This converges with the institutional actors' discourses, since they do not recognize the institution's responsibility to develop students' plurilingual competences and tend to value only the instrumental role of English.

**Keywords:** higher education institutions, Bologna Process, language education, language education language policy, institutional discourses, institutional practices

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## 1 The Bologna Process and language education in higher education institutions

The Bologna Declaration (2001) calls for the constitution of a competitive and attractive European Higher Education Area (EHEA). A number of communiqués have been associated with it which extend its guidelines, such as: three-cycle degree structures; identification of competences and certification by the European Credit Transfer System; mobility by means of diverse modalities; students’ responsibility for their own learning and acknowledgement of the importance of lifelong training.

In Portugal, following these guidelines has emerged as a major challenge and since 2004 several legal instruments have been published. We emphasize in particular the definition of regulation instruments concerning the creation of the EHEA (Decree-Law 42/2005, 22 February) and some amendments to the law on the Portuguese education system that concern the creation of conditions to promote lifelong learning (Decree-Law 49/2005, 30 August) and the organization of higher education in three cycles (Decree-Law 74/2006, 24 March). When the Bologna Process was introduced, the University of Aveiro (UA) had already a “nível de consciência bem elevado relativamente (. . .) à preocupação com a qualidade, ao grau de internacionalização, à mobilidade de docentes e estudantes, à participação em redes de formação e investigação” [“a high level of awareness regarding . . . concerns with quality, level of internationalization, the mobility of students and teachers, participation in training and research networks”] (Alarcão et al. 2006: 62). At the UA, the restructuring of the curricula began in May 2005, and it was concluded in the academic year of 2007–2008.

It is important to stress that the Bologna Process is more than a simple restructuring of higher education; it is a “strategic response of European governments to the current economic and geopolitical context” (Tudor 2005: n.p.). This is confirmed by the Berlin Communiqué (2003), which repeats the EU’s intention to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world, ensuring economic sustainability and promoting social cohesion.

With this goal in mind we may ask: what is the role of language education in the construction of this competitive and cohesive European area? What are the

implications of the Bologna Process for language education in higher education institutions (HEIs)? Clearly, languages play a fundamental role since they are related to academic and professional mobility, to employability and lifelong learning, which are fundamental features in the creation of an EHEA (Prague Communiqué 2001; Bergen Communiqué 2005; Nancy Declaration 2006; London Communiqué 2007).

Academic and professional mobility imply, indeed, that HEIs can enhance the development of individuals' linguistic and cultural competences (Leuven Communiqué 2009). The development of an EHEA is contributing to the emergence of academic and professional contexts that require the ability to respond to multilingual and multicultural challenges. Therefore, preparing individuals for a multilingual labour market is considered to be a driving force of the Bologna Process (Reichert and Tauch 2003). This means that linguistic competences are central to the individual's employability (Hall 2000; Connell 2002), which is closely related to lifelong learning. Considering the number of languages spoken in Europe and the growth of academic and professional mobility, it is increasingly urgent that individuals acquire and develop competences in different languages throughout their lives. In this way the Bologna Process sets important challenges to language education in HEIs.

Following the same line of thought, the European Commission emphasizes the importance of providing language education for all higher education students, giving HEIs a central role in the promotion of multilingualism (European Commission 2003). Some European universities have been taking steps in this direction, specifically by reflecting on the importance of language learning and extending it to the different degrees they offer (Chambers 2004; Sárdi 2005).

This is one of the recommendations of the Berlin Communiqué (2003), which outlines the key objectives that European higher education should pursue: a) include a number of credits for foreign languages in all degrees in all disciplines; b) create an environment that supports language autonomous learning; c) promote cooperative language learning, bringing together speakers of different mother tongues; d) include as many languages as possible in curricula; and e) propose degrees in different languages.

In 2005, the European Commission reinforced these objectives in the document "A new framework strategy for multilingualism", in which HEIs are perceived as responsible for developing the multilingualism of students, teachers and local communities. The Nancy Declaration (2006) also emphasizes the role to be played by language education in HEIs in constructing a multilingual Europe, proposing guidelines for the development of explicit language policies that may contribute to the construction of a multicultural and democratic Europe, which implies the generalization of language learning.

## 2 Language education policy in higher education institutions

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are fundamental to social development, as they are driving forces of change at economic, cultural, scientific and technological levels. Within the European context these institutions are asked to contribute to “European integration and the necessity of maintaining linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe” (European Language Council 2001: 3). Hence HEIs are required to become multilingual spaces, promoting plurilingualism both as a value and a competence (Beacco and Byram 2003), and contributing to the development of “an understanding and acceptance of the immense value of linguistic diversity and of less widely used languages” (Bergan 2002: 18). This implies the development of consistent and explicit institutional language policies that take account of the increasing contact between individuals, languages and cultures in the academy and in society, situating “themselves with respect to the goal of multilingualism” (Tudor 2006: n.p.). This ideological discourse, relating language policies with social cohesion and progress, is one of the great challenge that HEIs face nowadays: the need to reflect about languages and the role they play in different institutional contexts (teaching, research, and cooperation with local, national and international society) and in societal dynamics.

As Wolfgang Mackiewicz, president of the European Language Council, emphasizes, “HEIs have to acknowledge that their mission has to include an institutional language policy” (2009: n.p.). The acknowledgment of this mission seems to be growing in HEIs as we can see in the findings of recent surveys. For instance, based on the results of the project ENLU (European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning among all Undergraduates), Tudor points out: “A growing number of HE institutions have adopted policies designed to promote language learning. It is, thus, possible to speak of the emergence of the concept of HE language policy, namely the strategic decisions of HEIs to equip their students, researchers and both academic and administrative staff with communicative skills in one or more foreign languages” (2008: 51). Nevertheless, this statement still does not apply to a significant number of HEIs, and we cannot claim that awareness of the importance of languages informs the strategies of all European universities, as Bergan has acknowledged: “language policies are an important if perhaps underdeveloped part of overall Higher Education policies” (2002: 7).

As for their teaching mission, which is the focus of this article, HEIs are asked to develop policies that recognize the importance of languages and language education by providing all undergraduate and postgraduate students with the opportunity to take a number of credits in languages whatever academic discipline

they are specialising in, by offering a wider range of languages, and by adopting a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach (Cummins 2000; Commission of the European Communities 1991). Although a few of these recommendations have been followed by some HEIs, language education for all is still an area under development. This conclusion is consistent with the words of Mackiewicz, who stresses the absence of concerted action regarding the promotion of language education policies in higher education: "... many universities still do not offer all of their students in undergraduate education the opportunity to take a number of credits in languages. Although student mobility has become an accepted part of university life, the provision of linguistic and intercultural preparation and support for mobility is often insufficient" (2002: 5).

The need to develop and implement language education policies at the institutional level, especially as regards teaching, is also emphasized by several European projects, such as TNP (Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages), ENLU (European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning among all Undergraduates), MOLAN (Network for the Exchange of Information about Good Practices that serve to motivate Language Learners) and DYLAN (Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity). The conclusions drawn by these projects provide important clues about possible frameworks for HEIs in this matter. Nevertheless, this is not an easy challenge to respond to, because it brings together several challenges and difficulties, as Kelly points out: "dirtying our hands in the policy arena is a complex enterprise" (2003: 102).

One of these challenges, highlighted by the results of the projects mentioned above, relates to the need to examine issues of pedagogical planning and coordination in HEIs, which implies the creation of institutional bodies responsible for analysing: the continuum of language learning from secondary schooling to higher education; the integration of language learning in curricula in all disciplines; the use of different language learning strategies; language learning by teaching and administrative staff; and the need to develop the linguistic competences of individuals coming from different countries.

### **3 The study: Language education at the University of Aveiro before and after Bologna**

Taking account of the issues we have summarized, a study was undertaken at the University of Aveiro (UA), Portugal, that set out to describe institutional practices and discourses concerning the use and function of languages in undergraduate and postgraduate education, in two academic years (2002–2003 and 2007–2008,

before and after the Bologna Process). In order to identify language education practices and to understand the way the Bologna Process influenced curricular choices, we analysed all 95 language course programmes in 2002–2003 and all 146 language course programmes in 2007–2008. This allowed us to identify and compare the taught/learned languages, the language courses offered, and the degree programmes that included them as integrated element. By comparing these features in the two academic years in question we were able to understand whether the Bologna Process influenced curricular choices at the UA.

To access institutional discourses concerning language education – in other words, institutional thinking in this matter – we interviewed seven actors responsible for teaching and management at the UA in 2007–2008: the Rector (R), a former Rector (FR), Vice Rector for Undergraduate Education (VR/UG), Vice Rector for Postgraduate Education (VR/PG), the head of the Department of Languages and Cultures (HDLC), Erasmus Programme Coordinator (EPC) and the President of Students’ Union (PSU). The semi-structured interviews were composed of four parts comprising questions on: language education policy, language education, languages and research, languages and interaction with society. Table 1 summarizes the objectives of the investigation and the questions asked.

**Table 1:** Interviews with institutional actors

Objectives	Questions
Identify institutional views concerning the relevance of language learning in undergraduate and postgraduate education	Do you consider that it is relevant to integrate language courses in all curricula? Why? Why not?
Describe institutional views of foreign languages (status, functions, importance) in undergraduate and postgraduate education as regards the integration of foreign languages in the curriculum	In your opinion what kind of criteria should underlie the choice of those language courses? Why?

## 4 Data analysis

We begin by presenting our analysis of all language courses in order to identify practices within language education: i) languages taught/learned and language courses offered, and ii) the degree programmes in which they were fully integrated elements. Then we present our analysis of the semi-structured interviews with institutional actors which summarizes their views on the integration of language courses in curricula and to the status, function and importance of languages.

4.1 Institutional practices

4.1.1 Languages taught/learned and language courses

In 2002–2003 seven languages were taught/learned at the UA: Chinese, English, French, German, Greek, Latin and Portuguese (as a foreign language and as mother tongue). In 2007–2008 this number increased to eight with the addition of Arabic and Spanish and the loss of Greek. There were 95 language courses in 2002–2003 and 146 in 2007–2008. Figure 1 shows the distribution of courses across languages.

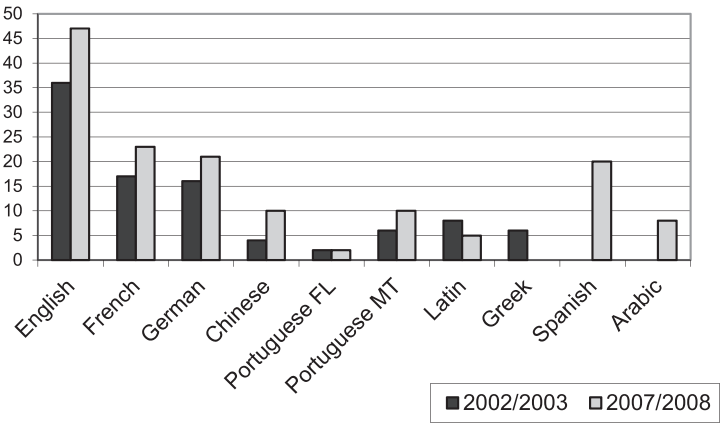


Fig. 1: Language Courses

In 2007–2008 there were 51 more language courses than in 2002–2003. This can be explained partly by the introduction of Arabic and Spanish. However, courses in these languages are integrated only in specialist language degrees offered by the Department of Languages and Cultures (DLC). The increase in the number of language courses is also due to the creation of a number of new extra-curricular evening courses at the DLC: in 2002–2003 there were only two such courses, in Portuguese as a foreign language, whereas in 2007–2008 there were ten, in Portuguese as a foreign language, English, French, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Spanish, German, and Arabic.

4.1.2 Degree programmes with integrated language courses

Table 2 gives an overview of the degree programmes with integrated language courses in 2002–2003 and 2007–2008; the programmes printed in boldface are specialist language degrees.

Table 2: Degree programmes with integrated language courses

2002–2003	2007–2008
<b>UNDERGRADUATE:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>English/German (teacher education)</b></li> <li>– <b>Languages and Business Relations</b></li> <li>– <b>Portuguese/English (teacher education)</b></li> <li>– <b>Portuguese/French (teacher education)</b></li> <li>– <b>Portuguese/Latin/Greek (teacher education)</b></li> <li>– Accounting and Administration</li> <li>– Accounting and Public Administration</li> <li>– Basic Education</li> <li>– Commerce Superior Studies</li> <li>– Communication New Technologies</li> <li>– Documentation and Archive Management</li> <li>– Electromechanical Engineering</li> <li>– Electronic Engineering</li> <li>– Geographic Engineering</li> <li>– Information and Communication Technologies</li> <li>– Office Administration Studies</li> <li>– Pre-School Education</li> <li>– Public Sector Administration</li> <li>– Public Sector and Local Government Management</li> <li>– Tourism</li> </ul> <b>POSTGRADUATE:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>English Studies (Master)</b></li> </ul>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> CYCLE:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Languages and Business Relations</b></li> <li>– <b>Languages and Editorial Administration</b></li> <li>– <b>Languages and Editorial Studies</b></li> <li>– <b>Languages and Specialized Translation</b></li> <li>– <b>Languages, Literatures and Cultures</b></li> <li>– <b>Translation</b></li> <li>– Accounting</li> <li>– Biomedical Sciences</li> <li>– Commerce</li> <li>– Documentation and Archive Management</li> <li>– Electrotechnical Engineering</li> <li>– Finance</li> <li>– Information Technologies</li> <li>– Legal Technician Studies</li> <li>– Marketing</li> <li>– Office Administration Studies</li> <li>– Physics</li> <li>– Public Sector Administration</li> <li>– Public Sector and Local Government Management</li> <li>– Tourism</li> </ul> <b>2<sup>nd</sup> CYCLE:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Chinese Studies (Master)</b></li> <li>– European Master in Materials Science</li> <li>– <b>Languages and Business Relations</b></li> </ul>
21	23

Note: Degree programmes printed in boldface are specialist language degrees.

In 2002–2003 17% of the 123 degree programmes offered by the UA included language courses, and in 2007–2008, 14% of the 163 degree programmes did so. In other words, there was no significant increase in the number of degree programmes with integrated language courses. Furthermore, in 2003 six degree programmes with integrated language courses were degrees specializing in languages, including the programme in Languages and Business Relations (LBR), which offered courses in German, Chinese, French, English and Portuguese. In 2007–2008, there were eight degree programmes in the language field, and once again the degree in LBR stands out since, besides the language courses offered in 2002–2003, it also included courses in Arabic and Spanish.



As for the degree programmes in other disciplines, the data analysis shows that in both academic years these programmes integrated almost exclusively English language courses, a tendency which was enhanced in 2007–2008, as shown in Table 3. In this connexion it should be noted that in 2003–2004 five degree programmes integrated French courses, while in 2007–2008 only one did

**Table 3:** Non-language-specialist degrees and language courses

		English	French	German	Portuguese	Spanish
2002–2003	Public Sector Administration	x				
	Accounting and Administration	x			x	
	Accounting and Public Administration	x	x			
	Documentation and Archive Management	x	x			
	Pre-School Education				x	
	Electromechanical Engineering	x	x		x	
	Electronic Engineering	x				
	Geographic Engineering	x				
	Basic Education					
	Commerce Superior Studies	x	x		x	
	Tourism				x	
	Public Sector and Local Government Management	x	x		x	
	Communication New Technologies	x				
	Office Administration Studies	x		x	x	
	Information and Communication Technologies	x			x	
2007–2008	Accounting	x				
	Biomedical Sciences	x				
	Commerce	x				
	Documentation and Archive Management	x			x	
	Electrotechnical Engineering	x				
	Finance	x				
	Information Technologies	x				
	Legal Technician Studies	x			x	
	Marketing	x				
	Office Administration Studies	x	x	x	x	x
	Physics	x				
	Public Sector Administration	x				
	Public Sector and Local Government Management	x				
	Tourism	x				
	European Master in Materials Science	x				

so. Furthermore, whereas in 2002–2003 26 language courses were distributed across the non-language-specialist degree programmes, in 2007–2008 this number had fallen to 21.

In summary, these results show that although the languages offered by the institution were a little more varied in 2007–2008, mainly in degree programmes in the languages field and in evening courses provided by the Department of Languages and Cultures, between 2002–2003 and 2007–2008 the percentage of degree programmes that included language courses decreased, and by 2007–2008 English was almost the only language offered in non-language-specialist degree programmes.

## 4.2 Institutional discourses

The semi-structured interviews with institutional actors revealed their beliefs concerning the inclusion of language courses in university curricula and the status, function and importance of languages. Four of our interviewees believed that it is important to include language courses in all degree programmes (President of Students' Union, Rector, Former Rector, and Vice Rector for Postgraduate Education). Their main reasons were pragmatic: language learning is valued because it gives graduates enhanced access to the world of work and to prized professional careers (the economic criterion; Dabène 1997): *"I'm talking about First Cycle students . . . all of them must leave the university speaking English correctly in order to get good jobs . . . this must be assumed by the institution"* (VR/PG); *"I notice that those who can speak English have more career opportunities"* (R). Undoubtedly this demonstrates a view of language as a tool of economic and professional empowerment (Calvet 1999; Lehtonen and Karjalainen 2008), where English is the only language referred to.

A further reason our interviewees gave for including language courses in degree programmes had to do with the institution's internationalization strategy (de Wit 2002) implying the adoption of a CLIL approach; again English was almost exclusively the language they mentioned: *"I think that English is very important to the institution's competitiveness as far as education is concerned . . . this includes not only subjects but also entire Second Cycle degrees in English"* (R). In the minds of these actors the internationalization of education evokes the relation between languages and mobility. This relation is clearly identified by six actors, who emphasize the role of languages and language education in boosting or inhibiting students' and teachers' mobility. Portuguese is perceived as a language unlikely to attract foreign students and teachers, whereas the English language boosts mobility: *"mobility students come to Portugal and talk English with their*

*peers and they start learning Portuguese*” (VR/PG). Finally, another reason to include English language courses in degree programmes, pointed out by the same six institutional actors, is that proficiency in a foreign language allows students access to knowledge in their discipline: *“in Chemistry students must read in English . . . they have no choice”* (FR).

On the other hand, three interviewees (the Vice Rector for Undergraduate Education, the Erasmus Programme Coordinator, and the Head of the Department of Languages and Cultures) stated that language education is not the responsibility of HEIs, either because it is compulsory at elementary and secondary school or because it should be the responsibility of the individual student: *“in Portugal language learning is assured in basic and secondary schooling”* (VR/UG); *“languages may be acquired in other contexts . . . if a person enjoys learning languages s/he should go to a language school”* (EPC). These three actors drew attention to the existence of several extra-curricular evening courses in languages provided by the Department of Languages and Cultures; students can attend them if they want to and can afford to pay the fees.

Some institutional actors also pointed to obstacles that stand in the way of including language courses in degree programmes. These obstacles are related to the perception that, within the curricular restructuring required by the Bologna Process, language courses have not been included for lack of “space”: *“languages were sacrificed in the Bologna Process and people neglected to reintegrate them, for instance, in the Second Cycle . . . so far language courses have not been integrated”* (R); *“the tendency has been to reduce the number of courses in study programmes . . . if we integrate language courses people will ask whether that integration is relevant, for instance, in a Chemistry degree”* (HDL); *“I think that integrating language courses in curricula is relevant but that it is very difficult to do so in current study programmes”* (VR/PG); *“we know that curricula have been adapted in order to fulfill the three-plus-two requirement, and some courses had to be excluded, mainly language courses”* (PSU).

Although the Bologna Process appears to hinder the inclusion of language courses in university curricula, and in spite of the tendency to value English to the virtual exclusion of other languages, some institutional actors (R, VR/PG, FR) recognized the importance of developing competences in lesser known foreign languages. They connected this with graduates’ employability, noting that some languages are perceived as distinct assets that enhance individuals’ competitiveness in the job market: *“it is important to know other languages because this may enhance individuals’ competitiveness in whatever employment opportunities arise . . . sometimes job opportunities turn up because you know Slovak or Japanese or Chinese”* (R).

Table 4 systematizes our analysis of the interviews with institutional actors.

**Table 4:** Institutional discourses concerning languages and language education

<b>English:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– (only) language that is important to integrate in degree curricula</li><li>– strategy for graduate and postgraduate education internationalization (CLIL approach)</li><li>– instrument that enhances students' and teachers mobility</li><li>– economic and professional capital (for students)</li><li>– instrument that allows students' access to knowledge</li></ul>
<b>Portuguese:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– barrier to attracting foreign students, teachers and researchers</li></ul>
<b>Other languages:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– have no room in curricula (except as optional courses)</li><li>– useful for differentiating students in the professional market</li></ul>
<b>Language education:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– responsibility of elementary and secondary school</li><li>– individual responsibility</li></ul>

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

Our study of institutional practices and our analysis of interviews with institutional actors brought to light no evidence of a concern for the role of language learning in undergraduate and postgraduate education; little value appears to be attached to plurilingualism. Both practice and discourse emphasize the role of a single language, English, as a tool of economic and professional empowerment for students, a means of internationalizing the institution's programmes, boosting academic mobility, and accessing knowledge. These beliefs may justify the predominance of English in the few degree programmes that include language courses and the suggestion made by some of the actors we interviewed that more Second and Third Cycle degrees should be taught entirely in English. This would be a way of attracting foreign students and teachers and thus internationalizing the institution. In other words, English is emerging as a catalyst of individual and institutional opportunities after Portuguese, the second language of teaching and learning at the UA.

Our results also highlight the fact that the Bologna Process has imposed constraints on curricular choice in language education at the UA, given the decrease in the number of language courses offered and the degree programmes including them between 2002–2003 and 2007–2008. This situation coincides with the institutional actors' beliefs, since they did not acknowledge the institution's responsi-

bility to develop students' plurilingual competences. Language courses have been sacrificed in the curricular restructuring that has been fundamental to the Bologna Process (Tudor 2006). Indeed, even though the Bologna Declaration (2001) highlights the importance of language education in higher education, our results show that the way in which this has been interpreted and operationalized at the UA, and in other higher education institutions (Tudor 2005; Sárdi 2005), "has become a major force that pulls the higher education sector in the direction of anglicisation, and not in the direction of multilingualism" (Ljosland 2005: n.p.).

At the same time, it is important to note that some institutional actors emphasized the importance of integrating other foreign languages in the curricula, which implies a tension between what we may call "global" and "local" approaches. As regards the "global" dimension, we find English assuming a prominent role that derives mainly from the importance given to the strategy of internationalizing university education and thus determining the way the UA is known internationally. In this context, other languages (including Portuguese) are perceived as barriers. At the "local" level, on the other hand, we notice a concern to value other languages that may operate as "differentiator assets" in the economic and professional market.

The institutional practices and discourses concerning language education at the UA reveal a reductive perception of what a language education policy in higher education might be. In fact, language learning should not simply reflect the individual's professional concerns and the institution's internationalization strategy, but should also support other kinds of relation with languages and lead to the development of democratic societies, citizenship that includes civic values (such as solidarity and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity), and cognitive flexibility and creativity (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002). In our view the beliefs we have analysed concerning languages and language education are related to a restrictive conception of language that mainly values its instrumental dimension. This conception, held by the different academic actors in our study, may influence the language education policies that they defend: "Les enjeux généraux de l'enseignement de la langue sont en partie déterminés par la conception que l'on a de la langue elle-même" [The broad conception of what teaching language entails in part depends on how language itself is conceptualised.] (Council of Europe 2009: 39).

In conclusion, our study highlights the importance of reflecting on languages and the role of language competences in the university sector; and the importance of ensuring that in the process, the internationalization of education and academic mobility are pursued in ways that promote rather than constrain plurilingualism.

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